

A Biographical Sketch of Ross Dowson, by his comrade Harry Kopyto

Ross Jewitt Dowson, Canada's foremost Trotskyist leader for half a century, was born in Toronto on September 14, 1917, the third eldest in a family with six siblings. His father was a skilled printer who was an atheist and humanist introduced Ross to radical thought. His mother contributed to the family income as a stenographer.

Ross was both a product and a shaper of the times he lived in. He came to maturity in the dirty 30s when he witnessed hunger, strikes, marchers' demonstrations and police repression. The love of books that he acquired from his father led him to read the major radical writers and novelists of the time.

He came into contact with the Trotskyist movement through his older brother Murray who joined the Workers' Party of Canada while a student at York Memorial Collegiate in Toronto. Ross tagged along with Murray to meetings and at the age of 17 announced to his bewildered mother and family that he was going to devote his life to becoming a professional revolutionary, thereafter joining the Trotskyist movement himself.

During this time, Ross sold the *Vanguard*, supported strikes led by Eaton's garment

workers and autoworkers and helped organize public radical speakouts at Toronto's Earls Court Park. During this time he met Maurice Spector who along with James P. Cannon represented the US Communist Party at the Sixth World Conference of the Communist International in Moscow, and ended up smuggling home Trotsky's critique of Stalin's Comintern Program. Shortly afterwards, Trotsky was exiled from the Soviet Union and the Canadian Trotskyists were expelled from the Communist Party. Ross' early political activities in the mid- to late- thirties involved organizing a Youth Movement group at York Memorial Collegiate, helping workers facing evictions move their furniture back into their homes, and organizing aid for the Spanish Revolution as well as defending working class actions against attacks by Canadian fascists. It was during this time as well that the Canadian Trotskyist Movement underwent extensive experience with entryism into the CCF and later into the NDP. After lengthy and not entirely successful experiences, the Trotskyist Movement developed an orientation of maintaining a public face and newspaper while at the same time having some comrades participating as "closed" comrades inside the CCF. Immediately following the Second World War, the concept of entryism on the basis of working as a fraction within the CCF as a long-term, non-split perspective was finally implemented under Ross's leadership.

When the Second World War broke out and the Trotskyist Movement was banned by the War Measures Act, many of the leaders of the Socialist Workers League (as the Trotskyist Movement became known at this time), including Earle Birney, abandoned the movement as well as Marxism. Along with Murray Dowson, Ross kept the organization

intact, distributed an underground paper until 1942 and went on a western tour where he consolidated his contacts with Malcolm Bruce and Paddy Stanton, a well known anti-Stalin revolutionist on the west coast. Forced to apply to join the army in order to get a job and expecting to be rejected because he had flat feet, Ross unexpectedly found himself donning a uniform in 1942 and involuntarily becoming promoted to a Second Lieutenant. He lost no time in circulating the Trotskyist press, recruiting two soldier friends to the movement, and in 1944 leading a successful protest strike against forced labor at the army rate of pay on a railroad job site on track lines in between Toronto and Hamilton.

With the post-war period witnessing a dramatic growth in labor movements, the Canadian Trotskyists renamed themselves the Revolutionary Workers Party and reunited a cross-country movement which included a branch in Vancouver led by Reg and Ruth Bullock. During this time Ross edited *Labour Challenge*, ran for public office, worked as a full-time revolutionist living a frugal life on the dues and pledges of the comrades, and dedicated his daily life to party-building. However, he always left room for his interest in art design, architecture and literature.

During this time Ross ran in several election campaigns for Mayor of Toronto when the CCF failed to promote a candidate and on one occasion won 20% of the votes. The Globe and Mail chastised Toronto citizens for voting for a person with a “subversive” foreign ideology. However, by the early 1950s with a waning labor upsurge and the advance of McCarthyism, the movement found itself increasingly isolated. In 1953 the

Fourth International itself split as Michel Pablo advocated liquidating the Trotskyist movement into the broad Communist and labor parties throughout the world in order to be able to replenish its forces in time to avert an impending third world nuclear war. While the majority of the comrades in Canada under Ross' leadership resisted this line, a bitter demoralizing rift developed which left the new movement weak and demoralized. Nevertheless, Ross along with his brothers Murray and Hugh and sister Joyce remained active in the Trade Union movement, recruited new comrades and began to play a role in the Ban the Bomb and Anti-nuclear shelter movement. When the Communist Party fell apart in 1956-1957 following revelations of Stalin's crimes, and with the brutal repression of the Hungarian Revolution, Ross attempted to move out aggressively to win over dissidents.

By 1960, the Cuban Revolution and the struggle against segregation framed a new era of political activity. The CCF dissolved itself and new party emerged from its shell with strong organic links to the labor movement. Canada's two main trade union federations unified. Ross attended the founding convention of the NDP and hailed the founding of the labor party as the most significant event in Canadian working-class history to date. The League for Socialist Act at that time was established, unifying the Socialist Information Centre based on the west coast and the Socialist Educational League that Ross had led in Toronto. The Fair Play for Cuba Committee was established in defense of the Cuban revolution with comrades playing leading roles in that organization. Comrades became very active in the New Democratic Youth to the point where the leadership expelled 14 youth in 1963 in order to prevent the NDY from adopting a pro-Cuban and anti-NATO

position. An entire new group of young cadres joined the Young Socialists, continuing their active involvement in the NDP in 1965 and thereafter becoming active in the developing mass movement, especially the anti-Vietnam War movement where Trotskyists formed the backbone of all the major protests.

The Young Socialists of the youth section of the League for Socialist Action became very prominent, increasing their forces dramatically, so that by the late 1960s and early 1970s some 350 to 400 adherents had joined the organization. Although active in the anti-Vietnam War movement, contesting sometimes successfully student elections, publishing an attractive monthly paper and becoming the leading activists in both the student power movement and the women's rights movements, the politics of the League for Socialist action and Young Socialists remained focused on the NDP as the arena of the political interests of the labor movement that would be able to take power to realize the demands of the mass movement.

Ross collaborated in developing rounded political positions to meet the needs of a developing massive feminist movement in Canada, and in advocating Red Power and self-determination for indigenous peoples, as well as developing the focus of Canada's anti-Vietnam War movement with the demand to "End Canada's Complicity" (a slogan which Ross himself formulated) and "Withdraw U.S. Troops Now". The founding of Camp Poundmaker, the movement's summer camp halfway between Toronto and Montreal, which became the focus for educational, discussions and conferences for at least twenty years, helped establish the movement's successful presence in Quebec, where it embraced the nationalist movement and advocated an independent and socialist Quebec, organized as La Ligue Socialiste Ouvrière / Ligue des Jeunes Socialistes.

It was during this time that Ross elaborated – in a controversial proposal – the red-flagging of Canadian nationalism as having a progressive dynamic. Following the

spontaneous protest against the testing of a nuclear government by the US government at Amchitka, Alaska in late 1971, which involved one million Canadians, most Canadians sang “O Canada” at the protest rallies. Ross had already written about Canada’s unique relationship with the United States in a document entitled “Canada-US Relations,” the general line of which was adopted by the LSA in 1968. He concluded that the Canadian bourgeoisie was among the weakest of any advanced capitalist country in the world, that US capitalist classes dominate many key sectors of the Canadian economy and that the Canadian nationalist mood was fueled by an anti-US imperialist sentiment. Rejecting the reactionary patriotism of the Canadian bourgeoisie, Canadian nationalism had an anti-imperialist thrust. Shortly afterwards, this analysis bore fruit when the Left Wing Waffle group of the NDP suddenly and dramatically emerged, embracing public ownership of runaway US plants, a break from NATO, opposition to the war effort, self-determination for Quebec, and for democracy and autonomy in US-dominated international unions. Comrades in the movement who had become active again in the NDP Waffle group, following its decision to participate in the anti-war movement and to carry on a left wing campaign against corporate welfare, established their credibility and influence through this experience.

It was during this time as well that Ross joined Joe Hanson, the new leader of the US Socialist Workers Party who had helped protect Trotsky in Mexico, on a trip to Europe which resulted in the reunification of the Fourth International which had been divided for a decade following its split with Pablo.

As the 1960s drew to a close Ross attempted to transfer the leadership of the LSA and in 1972 nominated John Riddell, a youth activist who had joined the movement in 1960 to replace him. At this time as well, some radicalized youth —moving away from Stalinism

and Maoism and others, in particular around organizations known as Old Mole and the Red Circle in Toronto, were attracted to the LSA and decided to join it while still maintaining serious political differences. Ross grew alarmed when he saw the new leadership of the movement adapt itself to what he saw as the ultra-leftism of these forces. In no time at all the principle of unconditional but critical support of the NDP was abandoned and the LSA took a sharp turn away from its analysis of Canadian nationalism as expressing the dynamic of an anti-imperialist sentiment.

In a failed attempt to defend his positions as the Labor Party Tendency in the increasingly factional atmosphere of the 1973 pre-discussion period leading up to LSA convention, Ross and his comrades left the organization he had built over the past 13 years, forming the Socialist League, later known as the Forward Group, and publishing the monthly journal *Forward* until 1984.

(For further details on this period, and the subsequent history of the Forward Group until Ross's illness in 1989 and death in 2002, refer to "A Short Biography of Ross Dowson 1917-2002" on this website www.rossdowson.com)

June 27, 2002 H.K.

ROSS DOWSON

Ross Jewitt Dowson was born on September 4, 1917. His father passed on to him a lifelong love of books and radical ideas. Ross came to political consciousness during the dirty thirties when, as a young man, he witnessed the brutality and failure of the capitalist system and the efforts by workers to resist the degradation and poverty imposed on them.

At the age of 17, he told his mother that he would dedicate his life to becoming a professional revolutionary. He kept his promise fully by playing a leading role in the movements associated with the ideas of Leon Trotsky for the rest of his life.

Ross had one overwhelming and urgent imperative – to live each day of his life to build a socialist Canada in a socialist world. Ross never regarded the demands of the lifestyle that he chose – a frugal existence, a focus on political activity to the exclusion of marriage, constant exertion to take advantage of every opening for working-class agitation – as a sacrifice. Instead, he saw the political imperative both as an opportunity and an obligation that he dutifully fulfilled and that gave him a lasting measure of satisfaction. Cars, property, material wealth in all its forms meant nothing to him compared to the joy he felt at methodically building a better future for humanity by working for socialist democracy.

Ross was a worker and intellectual who possessed a unique and innovative mind. He methodically dissected a wide variety of news items every day and reviewed them periodically to assess and anticipate developments that would affect political events and the needs of the working-class. He would then develop a program and build an organization to lead workers and their allies to struggle for those demands that he saw as being transitional to a better world. It was this method that enabled him to anticipate what he considered to be the anti-capitalist dynamics of Canadian and Quebec nationalism and to coin expressions that summarized the political demands of broad, social protest movements such as “End Canada’s Complicity” in the anti-Vietnam war movement and “Every mother a willing mother, every child a wanted child” in the pro-choice movement.

Ross’ most significant contribution to revolutionary politics in Canada was his effort to link his organization to the fate of the broad left and trade union movement in Canada. The groups that Ross headed were fully committed to the N.D.P. as Canada’s labour party – a position that gave Ross’ militant class struggle politics broad resonance and influence. Ross’ orientation to the working-class as a whole prevented his group from degenerating into an isolated sect on the sidelines of major political events. It also resulted in his supporters spurring the N.D.P. into taking clear left-wing positions on various issues and integrating various social movements and protests into the Party.

A review of Ross’ political activities provides a glimpse of the high level of energy and consistency in his life: support for the Spanish Republican revolutionists between 1936 to

1939; the campaign in favour of financial payments instead of demeaning food vouchers to unemployed persons during the 1930s; opposition to conscription of soldiers as low paid railway workers in 1944; several campaigns for Mayor of Toronto including achieving 20% of the vote in 1950; playing a key role in the unification of the world-wide Trotskyist Fourth International in 1963; building an organization that played a leading role in the anti-Vietnam war movement and the women's movement, the student power movement and the Quebec nationalist movement in the 1960s and 1970s; campaigning for a democratic, constituent assembly during the constitutional debate during the early 1980s; litigating against the R.C.M.P. Security Service which he claimed defamed him by calling him subversive and speaking, writing and organizing to build an organized left inside the C.C.F. and later, the N.D.P. over a period of close to 60 years.

Ross died on February 18, 2002, following a debilitating stroke he experienced in 1989. His life remains a shining example of consistency and dedication to his socialist ideals.